



Thiel, Jonas (2019) The UK National Student Survey: an amalgam of discipline and neo-liberal governmentality. *British Educational Research Journal*, 45 (3). pp. 538-553. ISSN 0141-1926

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Version: Published Version

Publisher: Wiley

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3512>

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The UK National Student Survey: An amalgam of discipline and neo-liberal governmentality

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The UK National Student Survey (NSS) has high status on the agenda of UK universities. Its rise in status is linked to its influence on national rankings and associated funding streams referenced to the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). Consequently, many universities have implemented further assessments of student satisfaction, thereby putting additional internal performative pressures on courses and individual lecturers. The research contribution of this article comprises an analysis of the NSS through Foucault's notion of 'governmentality', with a particular focus on his work on 'discipline' and 'neo-liberal governmentality'. More specifically, by utilising qualitative data from interviews, research diaries and observations, it will be demonstrated how the NSS functions as a 'disciplinary' technology of government which subjects lecturers, departments and universities to intersecting panoptic gazes and perpetual ratings. In addition, the NSS can also be considered 'neo-liberal' in that it governs the academic population through narrow conceptions of 'freedom' and omnipresent competition. The article proposes that it is through the amalgamated forces of intersecting panoptic gazes, on the one hand, and neo-liberal free-market principles, on the other, that student feedback develops its power to govern.

Keywords: Foucault; discipline; governmentality; student evaluations of teaching; National Student Survey; neoliberalism

Introduction

In the UK, one could assume that steep hierarchies between students and academic teaching staff are a relic of the past. What used to be a clearly defined pyramidal order has given way to an egalitarian system of students judging their courses through the National Student Survey (NSS), an online questionnaire which purports to give 'students a powerful collective voice to help shape the future of their course and their university or college' (Ipsos MORI, 2006). Democracy prevails. This article, however, asks the critical question of whether the NSS and resultant institutional student appraisal systems are only democratic on the surface whilst surreptitiously producing collateral not visible to the naked eye. To approach this question, this article utilises Foucault's work on 'governmentality', with a particular focus on his understanding of 'neo-liberal governmentality' (Foucault, 2008, p. 193) and 'discipline' (Foucault,

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1977). It is suggested that student feedback systems could be understood as a hybrid governmental technology, which makes use of both disciplinary and neo-liberal governmentalities. It will be argued that the NSS thus produces lecturer subjectivities that become ‘competitised’, ‘responsibilised’ and hence ‘governable’.

To enquire into the governmental effects of student feedback systems, this article first outlines the published literature on student feedback systems. Second, the article’s methodology is presented. Third, the NSS is analysed through Foucault’s notions of hierarchical observation, normalising judgement and examinations. Fourth, Foucault’s work on liberal and neo-liberal governmentality is used to show how the NSS governs through narrow conceptions of ‘freedom’ and ‘competition’. The article concludes by showing how the NSS could best be understood as a disciplinary and neo-liberal hybrid.

Context: The National Student Survey

First implemented in 2005, the NSS claims to be ‘a high-profile census of nearly half a million students across the UK’, directed at undergraduate students in their final year of study (Ipsos MORI, 2006). Whilst Ipsos MORI, a private ‘global research company’ is entrusted with its implementation (Ipsos MORI, 2006), the survey ‘asks 27 questions, relating to eight aspects of the student experience’ (Ipsos MORI, 2018). In addition, students provide ‘positive and/or negative comments in an open-ended question’ (Ipsos MORI, 2018).

In an international context, the NSS could be understood as the British attempt to implement what is commonly referred to as student evaluations of teaching (SETs) (Cheng & Marsh, 2010). Similar SETs can hence be found in other countries, such as the Australian Course Evaluation Questionnaire (CEQ) (Kane *et al.*, 2008, p. 136), the US National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) (Kuh, 2009) or the Center for Higher Education University Ranking in Germany (Center for Higher Education, 2017).

The NSS has had a powerful impact on higher education institutions (HEIs) (Agnew *et al.*, 2016) and their lecturers (Jones *et al.*, 2014; Thiel, 2018). This impact has been exacerbated by the 2016 introduction of the UK Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), which partially utilises NSS data to then allocate a ‘gold, silver or bronze award’ to universities. These TEF ratings, in return, may allow English universities to raise their tuition fees (Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2017). Beyond the TEF, the NSS also influences higher education rankings, such as the *Times/Sunday Times* ‘Good University Guide’, the Complete University Guide (Jobbins *et al.*, 2008) and the *Guardian* ‘University Guide’ (Friedberg, 2016). On the one hand, these rankings are increasingly cited by future students and university staff as having an impact on their choices of universities (Locke, 2011, p. 201). On the other hand, however, other publications have suggested that universities may attach more meaning to the rankings ‘than the data alone may bear’, whilst influencing both ‘their strategic decision-making and more routine management processes’ (Locke, 2014, p. 77).

Turning to the critical literature regarding SETs, some authors have focused on their gender bias (Boring, 2017), whilst other research has focused on the lack of

validity of national SETs by critically interrogating the correlation between higher grades and higher marks (Brockx *et al.*, 2011). A more significant body of work has critiqued SETs in the context of the ongoing ‘marketisation of higher education’ (Jones-Devitt & Samiei, 2011; Molesworth *et al.*, 2011) and neo-liberalism (Grimmett *et al.*, 2009; McGettigan, 2013; Giroux, 2014). For example, McGettigan (2013, p. 55) suggests that the NSS, and resultant rankings, intend to put ‘consumer pressures’ on universities to improve quality and offer ‘value for money’, with the exact meaning of value becoming somewhat overdetermined (McGettigan, 2013, p. 55). Likewise, Naidoo and Williams (2014b, p. 1) conceptualise the NSS within the process of students being recast into consumers. This goes alongside a range of effects. First, students, due to their new-found customer status, are ‘always right [and] the university had better listen to the student’ (Furedi, 2011, p. 3). Second, universities are no longer seen as a public good, but as a service which can be bought (Naidoo & Williams, 2014a, p. 1). Third, students become increasingly passive, which reduces the quality of courses as well as taught provision becoming less creative (also see Naidoo & Williams, 2014a). Fourth, an increase in competitive behaviour amongst staff exacerbates pressures on middle managers, such as heads of departments (Parker, 2014). Importantly, these managers may question the quality of the NSS as a reliable assessment instrument, but are, nevertheless, required to respond to its results by ensuring blind staff responsiveness (Parker, 2014).

Conceptual framework: Foucault’s ‘governmentality’

This section introduces Foucault’s notion of ‘governmentality’, a neologism first mentioned in his 1978 lecture series ‘Security, Territory, Population’ (Foucault, 2009). Importantly, Foucault’s understanding of governmentality developed from a ‘historically determinate’ version in the beginning of his lecture series towards ‘a more general and abstract’ version (Foucault, 2009, p. 502). Whilst the former version denotes ‘liberal’ (Foucault, 2008, p. 22) and ‘neo-liberal governmentality’ (p. 193), the latter can best be understood in its plural form (i.e. as governmentalities or ‘technologies of government’) (Lemke, 2002, p. 53). Hence, Foucault’s notions of the Christian pastorate (Foucault, 2009), ‘sovereign power’ (Foucault, 1977, p. 48), ‘disciplinary power’ (Foucault, 1977, p. 187), ‘liberalism’ (Foucault, 2009, p. 51) and ‘neo-liberalism’ (Foucault, 2008, p. 117) can all be understood as different governmentalities (i.e. as ‘different technologies of government’) (Lemke, 2002, p. 53). This article theorises the NSS in the context of two specific governmentalities: (i) the ‘disciplines’ (Foucault, 1977) and (ii) liberal and neo-liberal governmentality (Foucault, 2008).

Disciplinary governmentality. Foucault’s (1977) ‘disciplines’ comprise (i) hierarchical observation, (ii) normalising judgement and (iii) examinations. First, the notion of ‘hierarchical observation’ describes the effect that observation has on humans (Foucault, 1977, p. 170): if humans think that they might be watched, they are more likely to be compliant. This principle of ‘eyes that must see without being seen’ (p. 171) is captured in Foucault’s description of Jeremy Bentham’s prison design of the Panopticon, which operates as follows: A watchtower is situated in the centre of a

circular prison building, a position from which prison guards have a clear view of the inmates' activities. Akin to 'venetian blinds' covering the windows, the watchtower's design prevents the inmates from being able to see the activities of the prison guards (p. 201). Hence, the prisoners can never be sure whether they are currently being watched and, thus, simply need to assume that they are being *permanently* observed. This observation technique uses what Foucault calls the *panoptic gaze*, a gaze which puts the prisoners under perceived continuous surveillance which makes them comply with the behavioural expectations of the prison. Importantly, the principle of hierarchical observation within the Panopticon can be extended in a pyramidal fashion (i.e. by 'supervising its own mechanisms') (p. 204). For example, in the

central tower, the director may spy on all the employees that he has under his orders: ... and it will even be possible to observe the director himself. An inspector arriving unexpectedly at the centre of the Panopticon will be able to judge at a glance ... how the entire establishment is functioning. (Foucault, 1977, p. 204)

In short, the prisoners are under hierarchical observation from the prison guards, whilst the prison guards themselves are under similar observation from the prison director. This pyramidal principle may describe the workings of many institutions, with senior personnel observing 'lower-ranking' employees.

Moving on, *normalising judgement* describes the power of normalisation on the subject: people are judged 'by where their actions place them on a ranked scale that compares them to everyone else' (Gutting, 2006, p. 84). For example, the eighteenth-century *École Militaire* was separated into classes known as 'the very good', 'the good', the 'médiocres', 'the bad' and 'the shameful' (Foucault, 1977, p. 181). It was through being able to *compare* these classes to—and *differentiate* them from—one another; through having the capacity to *hierarchically* order them (with a *homogenising* effect); and through *excluding* certain classes by making them into the abnormal—as in the example of the 'shameful' class of the *École Militaire* (p. 183)—that normalising judgement unleashed its disciplinary effects. Importantly, only 'merit and behaviour' (p. 182) were to influence the allocation to these classes. This fluidity enabled a disciplining by rewards (e.g. through awarding 'higher ranks and places') and punishment ('by reversing this process') (p. 181).

Lastly, Foucault (1977) suggests that the '*examination*' combines both hierarchical observation and normalising judgement. Importantly, by specifying the *time* (e.g. timetables, activity durations) and *space* (e.g. positions in a room) in which individual human bodies are expected to undertake specific *bodily movements* (e.g. whole-body movements, gesture coordinations, tool usage, exercise regimes), discipline produces what Foucault calls docile bodies (i.e. compliant subjects which are nevertheless productive in achieving a certain task).

Liberal and neo-liberal governmentality. Foucault's concept of 'liberal governmentality' is first implied in the context of what Foucault terms 'apparatuses of security' (Foucault, 2009, p. 144). Importantly, 'apparatuses of security' are different from 'sovereign power' and 'disciplinary power' in that they enter a certain amount of freedom into the art of governing by letting 'things happen' (p. 68). As an example, Foucault discusses seventeenth and eighteenth-century French grain shortages,

which frequently produced famines and hence posed significant risks to the ruling elites due to the dangers of civil unrest. 'It was precisely this kind of immediate solidarity' of this large-scale civil unrest that needed to be prevented (p. 63). Hence, after various failed mercantilist policies of achieving low grain prices through 'disciplinary mechanisms' (p. 97), a group of scholars—the 'physiocrats'—suggested that famines may be avoided by introducing 'laissez-faire' into the art of governing by, for example, allowing for prices to rise and then settle at the 'just level' (p. 444) based on supply and demand. *Crucially, the aim of economic 'laissez-faire' was not to prevent people from dying of hunger in toto.* Rather, the danger of a large-scale famine and ensuing political instability was to be statistically assessed. Whilst 'scarcity-scourges' (i.e. famines) were to be avoided, the fact that certain individuals would starve constituted an *indispensable element* of liberal governmentality:

the scarcity-scurge disappears ... [the] scarcity that causes the death of individuals not only does not disappear, *it must not disappear.* (Foucault, 2009, p. 64; emphasis added)

Moving on, Foucault suggests that *neo-liberal governmentality* partly builds upon and partly deviates from liberal governmentality (Brown, 2015). It builds on liberalism by safeguarding the 'security of the natural phenomena of economic processes' (Foucault, 2009, p. 451); yet, it deviates from liberalism's conviction in government abstinence and the 'natural regulations' of markets. Under neo-liberalism, markets are no longer natural. Instead, it *becomes the state's responsibility to guarantee their 'effective' operation.* Foucault (2008, p. 118) first explores the non-naturalness of competition by examining 'ordo-liberalism' as an early form of neo-liberalism which—in comparison to classical economic theory—had a 'radical anti-naturalistic conception of the market and of the principle of competition' (Lemke, 2001, p. 193). Ordo-liberals believed that laissez-faire produced monopolisation and was hence to be rejected. Rather, competitive markets needed to be 'produced by an active governmentality' (p. 121). The 'Chicago School' then significantly built on ordo-liberalism by seeking to 'universalise competition' into all human relations (Lemke, 2001, p. 197). In this context, Foucault (2008) evokes the concept of *homo oeconomicus* as the self-interested, rational, autonomous, entrepreneurial self who is in constant pursuit of enhancing his or her 'human capital' (Foucault, 2008). Crucially, this human capital is to be generated through humans' 'capacity for self-control' as an important '*technology of the self*' (Lemke, 2002, p. 52). Through self-control, individual associations, families and subjects become 'responsibilised', as previous 'social risks such as illness, unemployment, poverty and so forth' now shift into issues of 'self-care' (p. 59).

In short, whilst the rise of liberal governmentality enabled the governing of the population by avoiding large-scale discontent through the introduction of laissez-faire, the rise of neo-liberalism allowed for the governing of the population through the active creation of competitive markets.

Methodology

This article originates from a research study which sought to capture the experiences of university lecturers in education at two large post-1992 UK universities. Its data stems from 'free association narrative interviews' (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000) with

university lecturers; observations (cf. Jones & Somekh, 2004) of university lecturers' teaching sessions; and two research diaries (one of which is autobiographical). All data has been anonymised and participants have consented for their data to be used.

Paradigmatically, this article builds on Foucault's conception of ontology in that it understands reality as 'the result of social practices and struggles over truth and objectivity' (Oksala, 2010, p. 445). Student feedback systems are hence an important part of these struggles. In this context, *knowledge* does not 'represent reality, but has instead a productive role in shaping and configuring reality' (Olsson & Petersson, 2008, p. 61). For example, the knowledge of lecturers' student satisfaction ratings has an important effect on how lecturers can subsequently be managed and disciplined. Similarly, knowledge is important in terms of 'beliefs'. For instance, university managers and lecturers have to *believe* that the NSS significantly influences student intake so that universities put student feedback high on their agenda. A lack of belief, conversely, would significantly reduce the power of this very feedback inside the institution, leaving only the inter-university market pressures of the NSS rankings intact. Hence, this article treats the narratives of university lecturers as a crucial component part of the operation of student feedback systems.

Analysis

The NSS is now analysed through Foucault's notion of 'governmentality'. First, it will be shown how the NSS utilises disciplinary power (Foucault, 1977). Second, the operation of liberal and neo-liberal governmentality (Foucault, 2008) within the NSS will be elucidated.

The NSS as a disciplinary governmentality

Beginning with disciplinary governmentality, the NSS utilises both 'hierarchical (panoptic) observations' as well as 'normalising judgements'. More specifically, the NSS is *panoptic* because there is a continual indeterminacy in terms of whether students' 'observations'—over the duration of their undergraduate degree—somehow find their expression in their final-year NSS. Similarly, there is a perpetual possibility that an anonymous mass of people—such as parents, prospective students and other stakeholders—may consult university NSS ratings online. Hence, just like in the Panopticon, universities can never be sure whether their 'performance' is consulted and, as a result, must assume continuous surveillance. Thus, they put significant energy into attaining positive student ratings. Importantly, there is a temporal dimension to this type of panoptic observation which shifts the panoptic gaze from being one of simultaneity (in the case of the prisoners) towards being 'stretched out' to a *panoptic time-window* (in the case of the NSS) in which there is always a theoretical chance that others might exercise their gaze.

Similarly, *normalising judgement* operates in that students judge their courses on a Likert-type scale from one to five. This, in return, influences the standing of each university in national rankings as well as whether universities are awarded gold, silver or bronze ratings in the TEF. More specifically, *normalising judgement* 'compares, differentiates, hierarchizes, homogenises, [and] excludes' (Foucault, 1977, p. 183):

national rankings *compare* and *differentiate* university courses and universities; and they *measure* ‘in quantitative terms and hierarchize [...]’ (Foucault, 1977, p. 183) student satisfaction with their universities. This hierarchy *homogenises* universities in that they increasingly make student feedback one of their priorities (Brown & Carasso, 2013). Furthermore, national rankings *exclude* those universities situated towards the lower end of the rankings (for example, by diminishing student demand for these courses). Hence, a decrease in student satisfaction instantaneously puts additional scrutiny on courses, as captured in Lisa’s diary entry:

Today the vice-chancellor sent an email to all staff about that the 2016 NSS results have decreased by a few percentage points from 2015. Whilst praising those courses which managed to increase their scores, he also said that the courses that attained negative student feedback must make it their absolute priority to scrutinise their courses in order to attain better student feedback in the future. (Excerpt 1—Lisa’s research diary)

Due to these external national pressures, universities have reconfigured internally. For example, many universities have implemented *internal surveys* so that any negative feedback can first be detected intra-institutionally before it materialises in the NSS (Canning, 2017). For instance, Lisa’s university implemented biannual internal surveys which were closely modelled on the NSS. Lisa writes:

In the internal survey, students also judge the modules. This puts quite a lot of pressure on module leaders who are, in a way, made responsible if the score for the module dips below 80%. This happened the other day. It all started when the module leader told us in a meeting that the module dropped below 80%. He seemed agitated and identified a few lecturers who he thought would be responsible for this negative student feedback. Apparently, students mentioned individual lecturers in their internal surveys – even though they are directed not to. The module leader also said that in student rep meetings, students complained about the same lecturers. [The module leader] said that, as a result of the feedback, the degree leader gave them [the underperforming lecturers] a stern talking to. Another outcome of this meeting was that they arranged weekly tutorials with the module leader which they [i.e. the underperforming lecturers] had to attend. (Excerpt 2—Lisa’s research diary)

In this specific internal survey, *normalising judgement* operates in that students rate individual modules which then places these modules ‘on a ranked scale that compares them to’ the other modules (Gutting, 2006, p. 84). When one module failed to attain the ‘minimal threshold’ (p. 182) of an 80% satisfaction rating, the module leader was situated ‘in a network of writing’ (Foucault, 1977, p. 189): he had to produce an action plan which outlined how he would attain positive student feedback in the future. By failing to attain the 80% threshold, the module was branded ‘abnormal’ (p. 183), akin to Foucault’s description of the ‘shameful’ class in eighteenth-century military schools (p. 182). This ‘shameful module’, interestingly, ‘only exist[ed] to disappear’ (p. 182): the module leader was forced to produce an action plan which outlined how the ‘shortcomings’ of the module would be addressed in the future.

Turning to *hierarchical observation*, internal surveys are part of a ‘pyramidal’ functioning of disciplinary power, with the only (albeit important) difference that students fulfil the panoptic gaze *on behalf of* university management. Just like the prison guards could be subjected to the panoptic gaze by the ‘prison director’ (p. 204), the module leaders in Lisa’s example were subjected to their managers’ gazes. These managers,

in return, may similarly be exposed to the panoptic gaze of university senior management. Michael remarks:

Student voice is all they [senior management] ever think about [laughing]. As I said, we are fine, but one of my mates from [another faculty] told me that they are under tremendous scrutiny to get better satisfaction scores. (Excerpt 3—Interview with Michael; nurse educator)

Due to internal surveys, module leaders are encouraged to react to increasingly fine-grained feedback which becomes possible through *student representative meetings*. In these meetings, students are able to express satisfaction with individual lecturers. For instance, in an interview with Rose, I enquired whether she ‘ever had any negative experience with student feedback’. She answered:

Rose *Hmm, I don't know if I ever ... um ... actually ever struggled with student feedback. I think I usually get quite good feedback actually.*

Interviewer *Oh really?*

Rose *Yeah, but I ... um ... I remember that it must be quite bad for some of my colleagues because ... somebody usually writes the minutes of these meetings.*

Interviewer *Are they?*

Rose *Yeah. So, each lecturer is given a score by students on how much they liked it. And sometimes some ... um ... some colleagues don't get a good score ... the students can look at [the minutes], but also, for example, [our course leader]. (Excerpt 4—Interview with Rose; teacher educator)*

Just like the NSS and internal surveys, these student representative meetings again utilise *normalising judgements*—that is, lecturers could *compare* their supposed teaching quality to that of their colleagues—and *panoptic observations* (the minutes can be downloaded by students and course leaders to ‘gaze at’).

In summary, universities, courses and lecturers are exposed to *continuous* panoptic ‘hierarchical observations’ and ‘normalising judgements’. These gazes are exercised from a multitude of different origins, but are eventually channelled in a hierarchical trajectory. That is, due to the pressures of ranking positions (i.e. normalising judgement) in league tables, universities struggle with other universities over ranking positions derived from student satisfaction ratings. From here onwards, disciplinary power predominantly functions in a pyramidal fashion which channels all the way from the top of the institutional hierarchical structure to the bottom. That is, by instrumentalising student feedback results, vice-chancellors and senior leadership use ‘*hierarchical observation*’ and ‘*normalising judgement*’ to discipline course leaders. These, in return, do the same to module leaders who do the same to individual lecturers. Hence, it can be argued that these combined ranking processes at various levels of scale, in combination with hierarchical management structures, facilitate the disciplining of module leaders, courses, departments and universities. As a result, student satisfaction becomes the primary guide of pedagogical practice:

I feel like I'm continuously thinking about student satisfaction. This really is at the heart of what I do. I'm worried that I might attain negative student feedback, downhearted when I receive negative feedback and thrilled when I receive positive feedback ... I feel like I permanently dance to the hymn sheet of student voice. (Excerpt 5—Author's research diary)

The NSS as a liberal and neo-liberal governmentality

In addition to using discipline to govern lecturers, it is now suggested that the NSS also functions as an ‘apparatus of security’ (as part of a wider *liberal governmentality*) as well as a technology of ‘competition’ (as part of a *neo-liberal governmentality*). Starting with the element of liberal governmentality, just as the physiocrats introduced economic ‘freedom’ into the governing of the population, a similar freedom can also be found in the governing of university staff:

This job [as a lecturer] is really hard, but what struck me is the incredible amount of freedom we have here in comparison to when I worked at schools ... (Excerpt 6—Interview with Emily; teacher educator)

However, just as political economy significantly reframed ‘freedom’ as ‘economic freedom’ (to exchange goods, to accumulate money, etc.), lecturers are ‘free’ to engage in any activity *as long as* the teaching yields a ‘return on investment’ (Brown, 2015, p. 23), that is *good student feedback*. Lisa, for example, quotes a colleague who suggested that:

As long as the students are happy, you can do whatever you want. (Excerpt 7—Lisa’s research diary)

In other words, freedom becomes redefined as the freedom to achieve good student feedback ratings and improved ranking positions on league tables. This, in return, may lead to practices in which the anticipation of positive feedback constitutes the main guiding principle of pedagogical decision-making:

When I’m planning for a session, I often think to myself, ‘Oh this is great. The students will really like this and then hopefully will give me good feedback’. (Excerpt 8—Interview with Karl; teacher educator)

Importantly, the introduction of ‘freedom’ is associated with *collateral damage*. That is, just as the physiocrats calculated the deaths of a few citizens into their liberalised trading practices, institutional feedback practices may already anticipate the redundancy of those few individual lecturers who fail to produce expected student feedback:

Last year, I had a bit of a bad year really ... I felt quite stretched with everything ... and ... um ... I also had a few student groups, I didn’t ... didn’t quite get on with. So one day, I got invited into [my line manager’s] office. I mean ... I didn’t really get on with my [line manager] anyway, but he told me that I needed to up my game if I wanted to continue my career at [Reddish University]. And I thought to myself, that’s ridiculous you just don’t like me ... but obviously didn’t say that out loud. Anyway ... I was trying ... hard to get better feedback afterwards. I mean, it worked, but that was very hard actually. (Excerpt 9—Interview with Rachel; teacher educator)

These redundancies (real or simply threatened) are, importantly, not to be avoided, but a rather necessary part of a liberal governmentality. That is, just as the physiocrats asserted that as long as the majority of the population have enough food the deaths of a few individuals are not only accepted but also *necessary*, redundancies are similarly necessary because they may function as a ‘warning’ along the lines of ‘look what happens when you fail to produce results’. Hence, the possibility of an ‘immediate

solidarity' (Foucault, 2009, p. 41) is not only minimised (i.e. colleagues are less likely to step out of line), but the majority of lecturers may, indeed, work even harder to attain positive ratings (e.g. Rachel was '*trying ... hard to get better feedback*'). Foucault's quote above could hence be amended to:

the [mass redundancy] disappears ... [the redundancy] that causes the [precarity] of individuals not only does not disappear, it must not disappear. (Foucault, 2009, p. 64; changed to suit analysis)

This production of collateral damage within the governing of academic populations is also important for intra-institutional and inter-institutional practices. For example, it could be hypothesised that university senior leadership may force the *department* with the poorest ratings to close (see excerpt 3); however, as long as the whole university attains better feedback, staff of other departments are less likely to mobilise. The 'closed' department simultaneously functions as a warning against solidary action as well as producing an urgency for other departments to work harder. Similarly, a university may fail to attract students due to bad feedback and hence may face closure (Evans, 2018); however, as long as the rest of the UK university sector performs better than this university—and it is in the nature of rankings that this is *always* the case—widespread discontent in the UK university sector is prevented. Failing universities hence become a necessary and productive feature of the NSS and associated rankings: the fear of becoming one of these bottom universities forces university senior leaders into performative action (cf. Ball, 2003) to raise student satisfaction.

Moving to neo-liberalism, the NSS functions as a neo-liberal governmental technology by establishing *competition* at various levels of scale through the implementation of 'market-shaped systems of action for individuals, groups and institutions' (Lemke, 2001, p. 197). In these systems, first, entities (i.e. institutions, groups and individuals) are pitched against one another in competitive struggles, whilst competitions necessarily entail 'winners' and 'losers' (cf. Brown, 2015). Lisa, for example, remarks:

I really don't know but I can't help to feel smug when I get better feedback than others. I don't think I'm usually very competitive, but when it comes to student feedback I can't help to feel brilliant when students rate me as better than others. (Excerpt 10—Lisa's research diary)

Second, departments are pitched against one another. For example, excerpt 3 illustrates that those departments with the worst student feedback are put under increasing pressure to improve their feedback (and become a 'winner') or otherwise face closure (and become a 'loser'). In contrast, 'winners' may be 'rewarded' by the removal of the threat of closure. For instance, Michael suggests:

My boss said that our university won't shut our course down because of our amazing student feedback. (Excerpt 11—Interview with Michael; nurse educator)

Lastly, universities are pitched against one another in their pursuit of 'customers' (i.e. students). This purposeful (and hence neo-liberal) *creation of competition* is reflected in the recent UK White Paper 'Success as a knowledge economy', which praises the virtues of competitive markets (Department for Business, Innovation and

Skills, 2016, p. 8). The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills asserts that ‘a competitive market’ (p. 8) should be created because:

competition between providers in any market incentivises them to raise their game, offering consumers a greater choice of more innovative and better quality products and services at lower cost. Higher education is no exception. (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2016, p. 8)

Interestingly, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills’ main reason to expand competitive higher education markets is to increase economic performance, in lieu of other potential reasons, such as personal fulfilment, equality, a desire to learn, and so on. That is, just as the Chicago school demanded, all spheres of life—in this case educational ones—are refigured in economic terms (cf. Foucault, 2008), where competition seeks to ‘incentivise’ (i.e. force) universities to ‘raise their game’ and contribute to an overall higher ‘GDP’ (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2016, p. 8).

As part of this perpetual competition, the NSS fosters ‘*entrepreneurial lecturers*’ (cf. *homo œconomicus*) who are in constant pursuit of enhancing their human capital (i.e. their ability to achieve good student feedback), along the lines of ‘do what you want but take care that your human capital is adapted’ (Simons & Masschelein, 2008, p. 55). This, yet again, is captured in excerpt 7: ‘As long as the students are happy, you can do whatever you want’. In addition, *homo œconomicus* requires the development of certain ‘technologies of the self’: lecturers, departments and universities only become successful within the game of competition if they enhance their ‘capacity for self-control’ (Lemke, 2002, p. 52) and become ‘*responsible*’. For example, ‘student satisfaction’ is not understood as a complex interplay of various (often idiosyncratic) factors (e.g. student effort, small class sizes, sufficient funds to survive), but instead becomes the sole responsibility of lecturers, departments and universities (akin to ‘pupil progress’ becoming the sole responsibility of teachers in schools):

What upsets me really, is that if you have a bad class, it’s still your responsibility. . . . they [management] still hold you to account if you don’t raise good student feedback . . . even if it’s actually the students who are . . . the baddies really. (Excerpt 12—Interview with Rachel; teacher educator)

In short, the responsibility for a positive ‘student experience’ is shifting towards lecturers. This ‘responsibilisation’ also creates certain contradictions. For example, counter to the neo-liberal avowal of the entrepreneurial self (cf. Brown, 2015), a *risk-averse* self emerges:

After one of my taught English sessions, [a colleague] informed me that he had just had a meeting with student representatives and that they were ‘really happy’ with my teaching. . . . [As a result of this feedback,] I . . . asked myself the question, ‘What can I do in the future to attain the same good student feedback?’. I believe this was the moment when I also started feeling a little trapped in my practice. That is, I wanted to continue teaching in a similar fashion so that my students would continue to give me positive student feedback. . . . (Excerpt 13—Author’s research diary)

That is, fully responsibilised lecturers may reason that in order to succeed (i.e. to maintain good student feedback) one must recreate precisely those instances where good feedback was obtained. This desire for good feedback (and the fear of attaining less favourable feedback) may hence produce subjects who eschew, and no longer embrace, risks. Sadly, regardless of how ‘responsible’ lecturers become, good student feedback is not guaranteed as:

a subject construed and constructed as human capital both for itself and for a firm or state is at persistent risk of failure, redundancy and abandonment through no doing of its own, regardless of how savvy and responsible it is. (Brown, 2015, p. 37)

For instance, Steve, in an interview, remarks:

Interviewer *So what was it like when the [other department] shut down?*
 Steve *It was awful ... I luckily managed to transfer over to [another university department] but I felt ... depressed about the whole thing ... [Because] many colleagues were ... successful and hardworking academics ... with publications and everything but ... um ... not all of them managed to find a job afterwards or they simply decided to retire ... (Excerpt 14—Interview with Steve; teacher educator)*

Conclusion

This article utilised Foucault’s (2008, 2009) notion of governmentality to enquire into the operation of the NSS. Since no research had hitherto investigated the NSS through Foucault’s work, this article sought to add to existing Foucauldian studies in the field of higher education (e.g. Morrissey, 2013) to show how student voice may be instrumentalised towards governing an (academic) population. Importantly, this article eschewed the perspective that Foucault was mainly interested in the ‘micro-physics of power’ and, instead, demonstrated how power operates at both micro and macro levels of scale (cf. Collier, 2009).

In summary, the NSS was first analysed as a ‘disciplinary technique of government’ which utilises ‘normalising judgements’ and ‘hierarchical observations’ to produce increasingly compliant lecturer subjectivities who prioritise the achievement of high student satisfaction. Second, Foucault’s analyses of liberal and neo-liberal ‘governmentality’ were considered. It was argued that the NSS governs the academic population by creating perpetual competition at various levels of scale, as lecturers, departments and universities are pitched against one another in artificially created ‘markets’. This neo-liberal governmentality uses the principle of economic market ‘freedoms’ to simultaneously avoid large-scale academic unrest whilst producing important collateral damage to function as ‘warnings’ along the lines of ‘look what happens if you don’t produce good student feedback’. Importantly, this neo-liberal governmentality governs the population by establishing competition in all spheres of social life because, put crudely, people (such as lecturers) are less likely to challenge the status quo if they are busy competing with one another.

On the premise that both disciplinary and neo-liberal governmentalities operate within the NSS, the important question now emerges how these two governmentalities

could be theorised together. Foucault (2009) already suggested not to think of sovereignty, discipline and liberal governmentality as separate historical epochs where ‘a society of sovereignty’ is replaced by ‘a society of discipline’, which is then replaced by a ‘society, say, of [liberal] government’ (p. 143). Rather liberal governmentality, discipline and sovereignty should be seen as a triangle in which ‘disciplinary techniques’ are ‘contemporaneous with’ and ‘bound up with’ liberalism (p. 143). That is, only if the modes of liberal ‘laissez-faire’ and neo-liberal ‘competition’ prove ineffective in producing ‘responsibilised’ subjects (Brown, 2015, p. 71), the government may decide to actively intervene by subjecting individuals to discipline (cf. Lemke, 2002). For example, lecturers may be free to do what they want in order to produce good student feedback; however, if this feedback fails to materialise, lecturers are subject to disciplinary power as was the case with Rachel (see excerpt 9).

However, contemporary HEIs—and society more generally—are part of a trend which perhaps may not have been as prevalent in Foucault’s time: the global proliferation of rating and ranking practices as embodied in online services, such as ‘Trip Advisor’ or ‘Airbnb’. Hence, it could be suggested that in the NSS (as one specific instance of a rating and ranking technology), neo-liberal governmentality and discipline may have morphed into a novel ‘*amalgam*’. This hybrid, which could be described as a ‘neo-liberal disciplinarian governmentality’, is composed of *artificially created markets* between universities (cf. neo-liberalism) which, nevertheless, operate within tightly controlled, *ranked* and *panoptic* parameters (cf. discipline). More specifically, neo-liberal governmentality may be at play in that universities, faculties, departments, programmes and lecturers are pitched against one another in *competitive struggles* over positive student ratings and thus, future student numbers and prospective income streams. Simultaneously, ‘disciplinary power’ is utilised in that the government and senior management instrumentalise the ‘*panoptic gaze*’ of students in order to ‘*normalisingly judge*’ lecturers and departments by ranking them within league tables. Hereby, the primary aim is not the production of, for example, ‘better’ or ‘more critical’ lecturers or institutions, but the enhancement of institutional ‘performance’ and ‘*competitive standing*’ (cf. neo-liberalism). If lecturers or institutions perform well, they might become ‘winners’ (Brown, 2015, p. 41), but those who perform towards the bottom of the rankings are turned into ‘losers’ (cf. neo-liberalism). These ‘losers’ may be put under additional *surveillance*—perhaps alongside meticulous ‘support’—to make them, yet again, into *docile and useful* subjects (cf. discipline) who are able to *compete* with the other lecturers (cf. neo-liberalism). At all times, universitanean actors are under continuous pressure to enhance their ‘*human capital*’ to improve their *competitive standing* (neo-liberalism) within highly systematised and clearly visible, panoptic rankings which, of course, operate through *normalising judgement* (cf. discipline).

There is, nevertheless, one inherent danger in this critique of student satisfaction: to posit students as seemingly all-powerful actors within the field of UK higher education. Such a view would mistakenly neglect the multitude of further disciplinary and neo-liberal technologies within the international university landscape, including those which figure students at the receiving end of disciplinary technologies, such as perpetual student assessment regimes (Raaper, 2016). In fact, it would be interesting to investigate the NSS in the context of a perpetual and reciprocal disciplining cycle in

which students discipline university lecturers (through SETs) and lecturers discipline students (through conventional means of testing and examinations). (Again, this reciprocal disciplining mirrors Airbnb rating practices, where both apartment hosts and their guests rate one another.) Further complexity emerges when vocational degrees are added into the analysis. For example, Ofsted appraisals of universities in the context of UK initial teacher education (MacBeath, 2011) could be understood as yet another disciplinary technology in which discipline filters down the university hierarchy with students at the receiving end. In addition, many students are also subjected more harshly to other effects of neoliberalism, such as an increasingly uncertain employment future (Lopes & Dewan, 2014) within ruthlessly *competitive* 'job markets' (Srnicsek & Williams, 2016). Hence, further research could now explore how students and lecturers could jointly *resist* the neo-liberal disciplinary effects of accountability technologies (e.g. grading practices and the NSS), instead of becoming caught up in reciprocal rating and ranking games.

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